

Visual methods for research in the fields of communication  
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**How to avoid the imposition of problems  
in the sociological survey by interviews?  
The resources of video elicitation  
from fictional images**

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**I would like to tell you about a research problem for a sociologist  
which made us imagine using filmic image and developing  
cooperation between a sociologist and a film researcher to solve it**



The problem I want to talk to you about is a fairly standard problem for sociology:

can we deal with all the subjects of sociologist interest by using interviews?

can we count on the interviewees to enlighten us on the questions we ask ourselves?

We know that we can not investigate everything with questionnaires

We know that we run a risk of what Bourdieu names “**imposition de problématique**” to the interviewees by formulating a question and possible answers: that guide the respondent on the meaning he must give to the question, it requires him to answer by accepting certain presuppositions

In the face of these limitations of the quantitative survey, we hoped that *qualitative research* offered a deeper listening

But...

Is this the case for all subjects? Does the polarization of the public debate, of the political debate on certain subjects, not come to complicate the work of the sociologist?

Are there not situations of speech that are not free, that are impeded and paralyzed by the public debate when it is very polarized?

Examples :

- French colonization,
- homosexuality,
- industry criticism in the name of environmental protection...

This is the case for speaking about *nuclear industry* in countries where there is a challenge to the principle of this activity (for environmental, economic or pacifist reasons)

When one wants to question populations living near nuclear installations on their relation to their territory of life, one often comes up against their hesitation to answer:

*am I allowed to speak freely about it, or do I have to remain silent?*

*Possibly because I'm working on it and my employer has asked me not to talk about it with anyone (military secrecy, industrial secret, security secret against malevolence...). But most of all because I do not know who I'm talking to: he may be pro-nuclear or anti-nuclear and he will judge me based on what I'm going to say. It's painful for me but it forces me to choose to be considered either as pro-nuclear or as anti-nuclear because that is how the world seems to be shared in the point of view of the interviewer*

As a sociologist interested in the particular situation of the respondent, can I resign myself to collect such abstract remarks, formulated in the broad categories of the public debate, and can I consider them as determinants of the respondent's practical behavior?

Or should I prefer to collect elements of his practice that enlighten me on what governs it?

Rather the second!

So the political polarization of the nuclear debate forces me to look for solutions on the ethnographic side. The problem is that observation *in situ* is not always possible on these subjects.

- It is relevant for nuclear work, at least for low-skilled work.
- It is more or less relevant for the residence.
- It is much less obvious, if not impossible, when it comes to family life.

So we must give up? We must be content with scattered traces...?

Unless you explore an unexpected path: practice video-elicitation interviews from an improbable audiovisual archive, a fictional series that situates its history in the nuclear power plant that is studied!

The drama is titled



It is then a question of proposing to the respondents a collaboration with the researcher who asks for help to situate the descriptive relevance of the images of the film and the gaps in the narration.

For this purpose, a video-elicitation device is built from this particular material:

- 5 hours of fiction film
- in the form of 26 episodes of 13 minutes.

It is impossible to show everything. We have to choose. There are many images whose unrealism is beyond doubt. But there are nevertheless very precise images of certain places, certain scenes of work, certain interactions at work. They seem very right to me. I judge from my experiences of participant observation of this world of work in the 1980s and 1990s, even if the TV series dates from the 1960s.

So we proceed to an editing work to group several episodes. We arrive at a *small film of 20 minutes*, with a coherent narrative, with the images and voices of the 1960s but at the pace of the television of the 2000s, with ellipses...

**Then we practice test interviews:**

- **we contact people by proposing to "come help us",**
- **we let them watch the short film before talking to us,**
- **we talk with them,**
- **then we see it together at the end of the interview to stop on such or such a moment that they would not have thought to evoke whereas it makes them think of something useful for us.**



**And it works!**

## **An example**



### **"It works": what does it mean?**

**1 / It is a good excuse to overcome interviewee's reservations against an interaction dreaded as painful, embarrassing, with someone who is so difficult to locate, whose intentions are so difficult to understand, whose judgment is feared**

**We play on the curiosity of people who wonder what we will show them (no one has heard about the TV series!), whether they work on the nuclear site or do not work there**

**It is "safe" for them because the images are totally "questionable": the fictional story of a television movie is unrealistic by definition. Nobody will be surprised. Nobody will be hurt of any critical remarks. On the other hand, we may want to emphasize that it is *quite* realistic on this or that point**

### **"It works": what does it mean?**

**2 / This gives access to a particular level of discourse, to stories of practice that echo the fiction without being reduced to a repertoire of anecdotes that the person has used to formulate in edifying narratives for certain circumstances of dialogue.**

**These remarks of the practice which interest the researcher, these observations of the practice that the researcher delegates to the interviewee, come of course echo with what is presented in the film but also with what is not in the film: the investigator can express his regret that such an element is not in the film and the person responds by detailing his singular practice on this point missing. The person doesn't feel embarrassed to deliver elements on his personal situation that are not synthesized in large categories of abstraction. The fictional story works as a kind of filmed portrait of the respondent that he would be invited to comment. He clarifies to the researcher that he performs regularly such action and much more rarely another in his daily life.**

**It is an indirect *filmic self-confrontation device***

**We could hope to generate a lower “effet d’imposition” thanks to the investigative device but we could also fear a redoubled “effet d’imposition” with the choice of images by us within 5 hours of the TV series:**

- **did not we impose people to talk about certain subjects by putting them in the little film that we show them ?**
- **did not we impose to leave others aside because absent from the film?**

**We tried to resist this risk:**

- **our interview guide listed what could be mentioned because being in the film**
- **and what could be by marking a surprise at the absence in the film.**

**The question was asked whether this absence was due to the director's inattention to a heavy question or a lack of importance of the issue for the "real" social actors.**

**But, beyond, we must emphasize the virtues of audiovisual fiction in this exercise:  
the polysemy of the animated images and dialogue is indisputable.**

**It returns each to its singularity of spectator. It leads everyone to the legitimate expression of an intertext, a context of existence giving meaning to its singular reception of the film.**

**And it is precisely this expression that the sociologist ethnographer seeks.**

### To conclude

1 / the image contributes to make possible a difficult speech, impeded by the politicization of the public debate by certain actors

2 / the better understanding of the situation of people living next to a nuclear power plant may be out of step with the expectations of the public debate on the subject and of the academic debate. For example, the anthropologist Françoise Zonabend (1989) writes that nuclear workers do not talk about nuclear risks because they are “in denial of risk”. If we show that they are talking about risks with us, we have to see how. Not necessarily to say that everything is fine! The alignment of the researcher's point of view with the anti-nuclear militant is no longer automatic

3 / to make heard by this *fictio-video-elicitation* device the words of popular social actors that we do not often hear is a *political project*. This device can be used to try a participative sociology, a public sociology

IMAGES DU TRAVAIL

TRAVAIL

DES IMAGES

Votre recherche  OK

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Images du travail, Travail des images

n°1. Mise en image des groupes professionnels

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De la fiction faire science : Mobiliser un feuilleton télévisé des années 1960 pour parler autrement du travail dans le nucléaire

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Résumé

<http://imagesdutravail.edel.univ-poitiers.fr/>